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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PBTS](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENTIAL CHIEF OF STAFF RAMIZ MEHDIYEV REVIEWS
NK, DEMOCRACY ISSUES WITH EUR DAS BRYZA

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Donald Lu per 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: In a January 14 meeting with visiting EUR DAS Matt Bryza, Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev repeated long-standing policy that Azerbaijan is prepared to give Nagorno Karabakh "the highest autonomous status" but cannot agree to "give territory to Armenia." Arguing that Azerbaijan is a greater strategic ally of the United States than Armenia, Mehdiyev urged the U.S. to exert pressure on Armenia to reach a solution to the conflict; Bryza cautioned that compromises on both sides will be needed to reach a solution. Outlining pressures exerted by Iran and Russia, Mehdiyev argued that Azerbaijan needs to pursue democratic reform at its own pace. However, he reaffirmed Azerbaijan's strategic goal of democratic reform and integration with the West, pledging that the GOAJ would create the conditions necessary for a free and fair presidential election in 2008. Mehdiyev also said the GOAJ had convened a group of experts to develop recommendations to counter growing religious extremism in Azerbaijan. End summary.

WE WON'T COMPROMISE ON NK

¶2. (C) In a January 14 meeting with visiting EUR DAS Matt Bryza, Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev questioned a recent statement by French OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair Bernard Fassier, in which Fassier reportedly stated that "neither Azerbaijan nor Armenia should get what it wants" in the ongoing Nagorno Karabakh (NK) peace negotiations. Mehdiyev repeated long-standing Azerbaijani policy that Azerbaijan is prepared to give NK "the highest autonomous status" but cannot agree to "give territory to Armenia." Bryza affirmed that the U.S. supports the territorial integrity of Azerbaijan but said the Minsk Group is working toward a peaceful solution of the conflict based on a compromise between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Helsinki Act's principles of territorial integrity of states and self-determination of peoples. The Minsk Group's Basic Principles also envision return of all seven Azerbaijani territories around NK occupied by Armenian forces, and the return of Azerbaijan's internally displaced population. Bryza cautioned that such a peaceful resolution will not be possible without compromise.

¶3. (C) Azerbaijan considers the United States to be an ally and strategic partner, Mehdiyev said. He argued that Armenia is a Russian "outpost" that continues to host Russian troops. The United States has a greater interest in Azerbaijan than in Armenia, Mehdiyev continued, and hopes that the U.S. will tell Armenia that there has been enough "nonsense" regarding the NK negotiations. Azerbaijan believes that it is in the United States' strategic interest to resolve the NK conflict now. Bryza affirmed that the United States seeks a

resolution of the conflict and welcomed President Aliyev's expressed commitment to secure a peaceful resolution, with 2008 being a decisive year.

TOUGH NEIGHBORHOOD

¶4. (C) Turning to broader regional issues, Mehdiyev said that Azerbaijan's internal situation is "okay" (normalnaya) and "stable" but that the GOAJ needs to maintain "balance" in its international relations in order to preserve that stability. Iran, Mehdiyev said, continues to seek to influence Azerbaijan's internal affairs. Iranian intelligence agents are working "very actively" in "every region of Azerbaijan" to influence political and religious affairs. The recent arrest and conviction of 15 Azerbaijani citizens on charges of plotting terrorist acts at the behest of Iran demonstrated the seriousness of the problem. Iran can interfere "at any moment" in Azerbaijan's internal events, Mehdiyev said.

¶5. (C) Russia also seeks to exert influence over events in Azerbaijan, Mehdiyev said, "but we will not be the little brother of Russia again." Azerbaijan is an independent, sovereign government and seeks to remain that way. Azerbaijan maintains "very good" relations with Turkey and is pleased that the United States and Turkey are pursuing a strategic partnership. Azerbaijan also maintains very good relations with Georgia and, according to Mehdiyev, "gave signals to the Azeri community in Georgia to support Saakashvili." Mehdiyev complained that the U.S. and the international community applied different standards to Azerbaijan and Georgia, arguing that the U.S. and international organizations praised Georgia's recent presidential election as free and fair, when similar circumstances in Azerbaijan prompted international criticism.

Bryza disputed this point, noting that the U.S. (and he personally) had, in fact, criticized certain aspects of the Georgian election and that he was traveling to Georgia later in the week to press democratic issues.

FREE AND FAIR ELECTION IN 2008

¶6. (C) Azerbaijan has defined its strategic goals, Mehdiyev said: developing a strong democratic state and integrating with the West. However, each government must pursue democratic reform within its own unique context and "mentality." "We cannot repeat what has been done in Georgia or Turkey," Mehdiyev said. Working within Azerbaijan's own context, Mehdiyev said the GOAJ wants to "create conditions so that everyone is sure that elections are free, fair, transparent and open." The GOAJ's goal, he continued, is to conduct a free, fair and transparent presidential election in ¶2008. "We have a big plan of measures to ensure this is the best election in Azerbaijan's history," Mehdiyev told Bryza. While there likely will be minor procedural irregularities and instances of family voting that reflect Azerbaijan's cultural traditions, "there will not be falsification," Mehdiyev said.

¶7. (C) "Azerbaijan is a democratic state that will continue on the path toward democratic principles," Mehdiyev assured Bryza. "I can't say this (the transition) will happen in 2-3 years but we are moving toward this goal." Mehdiyev argued that, in order to meet this goal, Azerbaijan needs a positive, constructive opposition instead of its current, "scandalous" opposition. He complained that Azerbaijan's opposition parties write "unobjective" criticisms, citing a recent article that alleged he "has a hand" in all of Baku's television stations. Mehdiyev urged the U.S. to work with the media to improve its professionalism; Pol/Econ Chief noted that the U.S. has a robust training and technical assistance program.

¶8. (C) Bryza welcomed Mehdiyev's affirmation of Azerbaijan's democratic goals and pledge to create the conditions

necessary for a free and fair presidential election in 2008. Noting EUR A/S Fried's recent discussions with Mehdiyev, Bryza assured Mehdiyev that the U.S. seeks evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, change in Azerbaijan. Bryza noted that the U.S. continues to be concerned by the situation of media freedom in Azerbaijan, adding that the continued jailing of journalists is a problem for Azerbaijan's image. Bryza reaffirmed the USG's continued willingness to help elevate the professional and ethical standards of Azerbaijan's journalists, but stressed that imprisoning journalists can never be the appropriate way to address this issue.

NEW PLANS TO COMBAT EXTREMISM?

¶9. (C) Noting that the U.S. and Azerbaijan maintain extremely good cooperation on terrorism and extremist threats, Mehdiyev said the GOAJ is also working on new measures to counter growing religious extremism within Azerbaijan. He warned of Iranian stirring of Azerbaijan's Shiite population, and Wahabbi extremist recruiters targeting Azerbaijan's Sunni population. Mehdiyev said the GOAJ had convened a group of experts to study current Islamist and extremist influences and possible means to counter them, "taking into account Azerbaijan's own traditions." Bryza noted that embracing local traditions to counter foreign extremist recruiters was a cornerstone of the U.S. strategy to contain extremism. Bryza urged Mehdiyev to ensure that the new GOAJ efforts take into account freedom of speech considerations, noting that freedom of conscience is important to long-term stability. Bryza also recognized the genuine threat Azerbaijan faces from extremist recruiters from abroad and pledged to work closely with the GOAJ to counter this threat.

Comment

¶10. (C) Mehdiyev, who directly oversees Azerbaijan's regional officials (ExComs) and is believed to have a free hand in setting domestic policy, will play a key role in determining the conduct of the 2008 presidential election. His assurances that the GOAJ will work toward creating the conditions necessary for free and fair elections are welcome; it is important the GOAJ take steps now to start creating these conditions, by easing pressure on the independent and opposition media, restoring freedom of assembly, and adopting electoral reform and key anti-fraud measures, such as finger-inking.

¶11. (U) Bryza cleared this message.
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